

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L OTTAWA 4962

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, PGOV, CA
SUBJECT: SPECULATION ABOUT EARLY FEDERAL ELECTIONS

1. SUMMARY: THERE IS GROWING SPECULATION THAT TRUDEAU MAY TRY TO CAPITALIZE ON CONCERN OVER QUEBEC SEPARATISM BY CALLING AN EARLY ELECTION. WE TEND TO DISCOUNT THIS POSSIBILITY. END SUMMARY.

2. POLITICAL OBSERVERS HERE ARE INCREASINGLY SPECULATING THAT TRUDEAU MAY DECIDE TO CALL AN EARLY ELECTION, POSSIBLY TO BE HELD IN LATE SPRING OR EARLY FALL. THEORY BEHIND THIS SPECULATION IS: (2) FORECASTS FOR 1977 INDICATE ECONOMY IS UNLIKELY TO IMPROVE SUBSTANTIALLY; (B) FEDERAL GOVERNMENT SEEMS INCAPABLE OF ALTERING ITS PUBLIC IMAGE OF INEPTITUDE, MISMANAGEMENT, AND ALOOFNESS; (C) THOUGH OPPOSITION PROGRESSIVE CONSERVATIVES (PC) LEAD LIBERALS IN POLLS, PUBLIC STILL REMAINS SKEPTICAL THAT JOE CLARK IS YET UP TO THE PRIME MINISTER POSITION; AND (D) THERE IS AN INCENTIVE FOR TRUDEAU TO CALL AN ELECTION BEFORE REDISTRICTING TAKES EFFECT JUNE 11, AS MOST OBSERVERS BELIEVE PC'S WILL CAPTURE MOST NEW COMMONS SEATS, HALF OF WHICH WILL BE IN WEST WHERE LIBERALS ARE WEAK. IN VIEW
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OF THESE FACTORS, PARTICULARLY THE DISCOURAGING ECONOMIC FORECASTS AND THE CURRENT POOR IMAGE OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, COMMENTATORS HERE ARE INCLINED TO BELIEVE TRUDEAU MAY TRY TO CAPITALIZE ON THE QUEBEC SEPARATIST THREAT BY CALLING EARLY ELECTIONS AND BY CAMPAIGNING AS THE ONLY NATIONAL LEADER CAPABLE OF

HOLDING THE PQ AT BAY AND THE COUNTRY TOGETHER.

3. COMMENT: WHILE FACTORS CITED PARAGRAPH TWO ARE RELEVANT, WE TEND TO DOUBT TRUDEAU WILL RUN RISKS OF AN EARLY ELECTION. FEDERAL LIBERALS ARE PAINFULLY AWARE OF BLUNDER BOURASSA MADE IN CALLING EARLY ELECTION IN QUEBEC, AND THEY REALIZE TRUDEAU MIGHT NOT BE ABLE TO MAKE STICK HIS ARGUMENT THAT HE IS THE BEST GUARANTEE OF CANADIAN UNITY IN THE FACE OF THE QUEBEC SEPARATIST THREAT. EVEN IF HE SUCCEEDED IN MAKING THIS ISSUE THE KEY QUESTION IN AN ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN, ANYTHING LESS THAN A CONCLUSIVE VICTORY BY THE LIBERALS COULD BE TREATED BY THE PARTI QUEBECOIS (PQ) AS A SHOW OF INDIFFERENCE BY REST OF CANADA TOWARDS QUEBEC AND COULD WEAKEN TRUDEAU'S POSITION IN CONFRONTING PQ LEADER LEVESQUE. MOREOVER, THOUGH LIBERALS SEEM TO BE GAINING IN POPULARITY, THEY ARE STILL RUNNING BEHIND PC'S IN POLLS, AND JOE CLARK AND HIS SUPPORTERS WOULD HAVE ABOUT SIX MONTHS BEFORE AN ELECTION TO WORK TO OVERCOME DOUBTS THAT HE HAS THE ABILITY TO BE AN EFFECTIVE PRIME MINISTER.
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